



to and from by xxcaribbean

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Summary:

a collection of random drabbles featuring steve, billy, or both.

1. fightin'

Notes for the Chapter:

based on this [prompt](#): tbh modern day Billy Hargrove is the type of person to get slam dunk drunk and say that he “wants to fight Chuck E. Cheese”

“Steven,” Billy says, albeit slightly slurred. The couch has been his home for the past half hour, and Steve, from the kitchen, only sees a face and a mop of blonde curls. “If that ugly ass mouse touches a single hair on those kid’s heads-”

Steve furrows his brow and pauses, suds from the soapy plate in his hand sliding away into the watery depths of the kitchen sink below. “Mouse?”

Billy snorts, “That hideous rat, Steven. I said this was a bad idea.”

It takes a moment for Steve to collect his thoughts, just a little off after a long day at work and then having to watch rambunctious kids for the rest of the afternoon. And then it dawns on him exactly what Billy’s referring to. “You mean Dustin’s birthday party this weekend?” he asks, curious as to why any harm would come to the rugrats.

Billy, however, snaps his fingers. Well, he tries to, at least, pointing at Steve and giving a deep nod. “I’ll fight him.”

“You will not fight Chuck E. Cheese, Billy,” Steve deadpans, but there’s a ghost of a smile at the corner of his mouth because a drunk Billy is always amusing, and he loves throwing out the haphazard shit Billy says when he’s sober. Billy never believes he says the shit he does, but Steve knows it’s Billy’s attempt at denial to stave off complete embarrassment.

“I will, Steven.”

“Will you be fighting him for the kid’s sake or yours?”

Billy’s eyes narrow, now attempting to sit up in protest. He’s ungraceful, but he manages to hold himself upright while Steve dries

off the plate in his hand, setting it aside on the dish rack. "I'll keep my eyes on him, then."

With a sigh of his own, Steve lets his smile go and simply says, "I'm sure you will, babe."

2. melodies

Notes for the Chapter:

based on this [prompt](#): okay I saw that video of Dacre playing the piano so here's my headcanon of the day: Billy's mother used to play the piano and also taught Billy since he was a child. His father did not like it. When Billy's mother passed away, Billy's father sold the piano and Billy stopped playing.

Billy doesn't remember the last time he's seen one in person, the shine of the wood and the keys a crisp white. Then again, the one he used to have, the one he'd learned to play on, was beaten and old, brown and chipped, and neither he or his mother were sure when the legs would finally give out.

But it was theirs, and he loved it, the soft melodies she'd play him with a smile, happiness seeping into the corner of her eyes that Billy tried so hard to emulate. She'd let him have a turn, correct his mistakes with ease and a gentleness Billy doesn't like to think about now because he's not been cocooned in that kind of love for years.

He turns his eyes away, holding his breath like maybe it'll disappear and the pain of the memories will fall back like the ocean's tide. Instead, he focuses on Max beaming up at Steve, watches as he gives her the go ahead to run farther into the house where the rest of the kids are before disappearing when she finally turns a corner.

"Thanks for dropping her off," Steve says with a nod. The hands on his hips don't tremble like they once did, fear beat out of his veins by something significantly more terrifying than Billy. And he wonders but isn't brave enough to ask.

Rather Billy dips his head and keeps it down, unsure of himself in a home that feels as cold as his but in a much different way. He wonder if Steve feels it, the chill of cleanliness and the museum-like quality the walls adorn. But again, he doesn't ask because this is a home he'd gladly welcome if he could, and he hopes - no, he prays - that Max will find comfort here, too.

Nothing else is said between them, Steve offering Billy a soft smile before he retreats back into his home. He leaves Billy with the understanding that he'll find his way out, an extension of faith he never would've received and Steve never would've given less than a month ago.

Billy intends to take Steve up on that offer, a list of deeds built into his head he must atone for, aiming at a target he knows is shrouded in mist and uncertainty. It makes it all that much harder to gage an end point, but deep down Billy knows there won't ever be one in sight.

So, he turns, eyes pausing on the piano because his blood burns, and his ears suddenly ring, drowning out that small voice that always reminds him to do better, be better. But Billy thinks back to the last time he played on that beat up piano, days after his mother passed. He thought he could find comfort in that, a form of release because he knew better than to shed tears for someone that wasn't ever going to come back.

He'd ended up with bruised fingers, one of them so swollen black and blue, he'd lied and said he'd tripped, finger landing all wrong on his way down. The truth of the matter, however, was much more sinister, and Billy grits his teeth as the anxiety builds in his chest, finding that his feet carry him over to the bench anyway. The key cover makes his hands shake, images of smashed knuckles and swollen joints admonishing him that he shouldn't touch.

There's a greater need residing underneath his ribs, though.

Billy sits down before he can tell himself no, and he positions his hands before he can tell himself that this is a very bad idea. The music he plays, Billy hardly remembers the name of - Beethoven, Mozart, something he's sure is easy to identify, but that's hardly the point for him now. With each press of the keys, that tension in his chest eases ever so slightly, frayed nerves mending as he remembers his mother's guidance. She'd had delicate hands, an artist of every variety, and Billy remembers wanting to be just like her.

Though it's too late for that now; she'd be disappointing in him like everyone else is, but he hopes that maybe this one lesson she'd given

him would be worth another compliment, another hug full of the smell of roses and vanilla.

Billy doesn't know how long he plays, but when he hits the last note, it's off because the grief is back, and he's had nothing better to do than to avoid it, crush it like it doesn't exist because it's weakness. Weakness he can't afford, and weakness no one in their right mind could take pleasure in.

Instead, Billy rubs at his eyes, refusing to entertain the sting of tears. He should've left, and he never should've allowed himself to glimpse at a past he often feels isn't worth remembering. It's too painful, and Billy doesn't like to think about the things that came after they lowered her casket into the ground.

"That was-"

Billy scrambles, almost knocking over his seat, catching it before the tile below could do any damage.

"Sorry, I didn't mean- I just thought I'd heard, uh."

It's Steve, Billy knows, glancing up to find the other boy standing at the front of the room. He looks sorry he's startled him, like a nervous puppy with his tail between his legs. Billy would snort if he could, the thought as ridiculous as the delicate nature he's created from the two of them. "I'm sorry," he says in reply because he has no other excuse than to give that and hope for the best.

Billy could run, but he's trying not to do that anymore.

Steve shrugs as the air around them turns from heavy to nonchalance. It doesn't make Billy any less coiled, but he can breathe again when Steve comes closer. He stands on the other side of the piano, possibly reading how wired Billy is from the latest emotional trip he hadn't planned on taking.

"You know," Steve begins again, the tips of his fingers tapping against the glossy black of the piano, "we've had this for years, but I don't think I've ever seen it used. Hell, is it even in tune?"

It takes a moment for Billy to realize that Steve is asking him, asking

as if Billy would know a thing or two about piano's and their functionality. It makes him wary, like Steve might pull something on him for being less inquisitive and more rotund with knowledge.

Though Steve's never been anything less than kind, as far as Billy's seen - save for *that* night, and Billy knows there's no reason not to trust him. "It could use a little work," he replies, gruffly. "Not as bad as it could be."

Steve nods again as if he knows what that means. It's clear he doesn't, but Billy appreciates the gesture anyway.

"You can stay if you want," Steve says without hesitation, hand casually sweeping across the piano. Something like trust flickers across his eyes, brief and warm; it's close to mutual understanding that melts holes through Billy's being. Reflected kindness is not something he's used to.

Billy doesn't say anything, though, and it's not for lack of trying. His mouth feels dry, tongue heavy like cotton with things he wishes he could say but can't. In all honesty, Billy knows it's a miracle that they've made it this far in conversation, with Steve doing more than his fair share of trudging this quasi-amicable accord along.

But he's grateful nonetheless; Billy will not take it for granted.

With one last smile, Steve leaves him, returning from where he initially came from. Faintly, Billy hears the kids in the other room, a shouting match ensuing until Steve's voice cuts through that. He's calling a truce amongst the players fighting a dragon or a wizard, Billy doesn't really know.

But as soon as Steve's gone, Billy sits down again. The piano is just as intimidating as it was before, but Billy forgoes the recollection of pain, and instead, chooses to make something beautiful instead.

3. observations

It's a gift, but sometimes Steve thinks it's a curse, the fact that Dustin has no qualms about asking questions, having an extremely curious nature about him. The idea that any child would be discouraged to question their world is dangerous territory, though, and Steve thinks that maybe Dustin's curiosity has grown in strength after the events of, well, *that* place and *that* time that none of them like to bring up if they can help it.

It makes him shudder, however, knowing that place had set a new benchmark, has been used as an example in all of their lives to be wary of every goddamn thing. Sometimes it's easier to miss the simplicity, but if these kids - who are currently arguing over which flavor of ice cream is better - can bounce back, both resilient and determined in their gait, Steve thinks he ought to suck it up and not let the trauma of it all destroy him.

These kids take his mind off of things, but then one'll open their mouth and Steve's left questioning why he's succumbed to the role of neighborhood babysitter. He's gone from knowing nearly next to nothing about kids - *teenagers!!! Steve, there's a difference*, Dustin has informed him multiple times - to knowing nearly all of their nuances and schemes they try, and fail, to pull on him.

Steve may not be great at a lot of things, okay, but he knows mischief when he sees it, and god, does he see it way too often.

"What's it like dating, uh, you know?"

Like right now. Like right now *now* when Dustin's poking his spoon into his bowl of dessert, not meeting Steve's eyes. Luckily, none of the others at the table have taken pause, dueling words about *chocolate chip cookie dough is where it's at* and a litany of *chocolate*, just *chocolate is better, okay*.

"No," Steve answers, glancing at the rest of the kids - *teenagers, Steve!* - and wondering why in god's name his tired mind thought it was a good idea to take them out and give them loaded *sugar*. As if any of them need more fuel to their already hyper fire. "I don't

know.”

Dustin’s eyes widen a fraction, and Steve can’t tell where this is going quite yet. The kid knows next to nothing about Steve’s dating life, done on purpose for the simple fact that some secrets are meant to remain exactly that - secrets. Not that he’s terrified of Dustin, or any of the gremlin’s judgment, per se, but he’s still working things out. Steve certainly doesn’t need a bunch of opinions on the matter, and he certainly doesn’t need it from the lot of kids he watches.

Well, not yet, at least. Steve’s found he does trust Dustin’s judgment, mildly. The kid’s got a good head on his shoulder’s, but Steve also knows there’s some things that these kids, despite all they’ve been through, are simply not ready for.

Shit, Steve doesn’t even know if he’s ready for what he walked into, either.

“You know,” Dustin prompts, bringing Steve back to the fact that this question is similar to molasses, gradual and leading to somewhere no good. He’s got a gut feeling telling him that whatever Dustin has in his mind, it’ll most definitely be absurd as hell.

Dustin, though, is rolling his hand as he encourages Steve for an answer, spoon gripped in it. Little flecks of ice cream drop onto the table, and Steve rolls his eyes, reaching over for a napkin to wipe it up. The least either of them could do is keep their space clean, and while Steve thinks about how much the kids would protest to wearing bibs, Dustin flips everything on its head by simply stating, “A vampire.”

“A *what?*” he sputters, and well, that simply gathers a lot of unwanted attention. The rest of the kids shut their mouth real damn fast, and Steve shrinks at the gaze a few people throw his way. The little joint they’re in isn’t that big, and he smiles apologetically at those he’s disturbed.

Though when Steve turns back to Dustin - and let’s face it, the rest of the kids - he sighs and feels an oncoming headache. They’ve asked before, if he was seeing anyone, Mike curious most of all since Steve’s not a regular visitor at the Wheeler household anymore. But he’s

shrugged it off because in the beginning and after everything they'd been through, Steve knew he needed to be alone for a bit, needed to sort out his head, his emotions, how to simply exist *alone* regardless of how much that ached.

His fingers don't itch to call her anymore, and he's learned that sometimes not having another half around can be a good thing.

Until, well, until the current circumstance took him by surprise.

"I'm not dating a vampire, Dustin," he sighs, pointedly arching a brow in his directly even though the answer is for all of them. He's not ready, simple as that, and no matter how much poking and prodding they do, Steve's not willing to budge on this. There's no surprise left in him that they've picked up on something, though. Steve's not even oblivious to the change in his demeanor and attitude as of late, but for all of them to be so careful of it, so in-tune to Steve's life both warms his heart and drives a wedge of annoyance through it.

Nosy. That's what they all are.

Though, Steve can't always fault them for that.

"Could've fooled me," Dustin eventually says. It seems the cat's gotten everyone's tongue because they're still quiet, glancing up at Steve through their lashes, casting their gaze down real quick when he catches their eye. "Those bite marks on your neck say otherwise, though."

Immediately, Steve slaps his hand over his neck, the rush of blood to his cheeks warm and dangerous. With wide eyes, he curses under his breath, caught in between his stupidity and the realization that *holy shit*, he actually forgot.

Fuck Billy Hargrove. Literally, *fuck him*, Steve thinks, wincing at the internal discourse he's having with himself. "That's-" he starts, but stops because honestly, what can he say here? He'd picked all the kids up a little less than an hour ago, and none of them said *anything*. "I- *We're not-*"

Absurd. He knew it, and he wonders how long Dustin was waiting for this, that shit-eating grin on his face now, the smug glint in his eye like he's finally caught Steve by having the upper hand.

Steve glares even though he doesn't actually mean it. He's just embarrassed, really, for being so careless, too caught up under Billy's thumb to protest when he'd bitten down so hard it made Steve come-

"Be quiet and finish so I can drop your ass home," he says instead, but the threat is weak, so very weak, and Dustin's grin gets even wider while everyone else bursts into hushed giggles because of course it's never good to underestimate Dustin.

"But *Steve*," the boy tries to protest, but it's not an actual cry of unfair treatment. It's teasing, and if Steve didn't feel so warm under the collar from the blush still plastered to his skin, he'd mock him just like he's mocking Steve.

The audacity.

"Not a word of this," he mutters to them all, crosses his arms over his chest and promptly pouts because *fuck*. It's the icing on the cake, really, and there's no way Billy won't hear about it.

Steve might as well go bury himself now. He's definitely not living this down.

4. impressions

Seeing the hardships of the world at such a young age has probably done more for him than he'd care to admit because it's taught him that good things only come to people who deserve it, and Billy thinks - no, he knows - he's never deserved it. He's asked himself why, gave himself plenty of reasons for all the wrong he's ever done in his life, and it all boils down to the simple fact that existing was the sole, obvious indulgence for the spiteful hand he'd been given. The self-loathing expands something ugly in his chest, the mirror ripe with reminders and justifications as to why Billy would love nothing more than to dig his own grave, pure satisfaction that it'd be the only moment he could finally rest easy.

But sometimes, sometimes when Steve looks at him, it feels different, feels like maybe there's hope for his undeserving existence. Hope that maybe kindness wasn't dashed out like a flame against a breeze, that even when Steve eyes him warily despite the fact that he beat his face in, there's an undercurrent of remorse and care.

Billy knows he's done a lot of wrong in his life, and he knows how hard he's tried to ruin himself into something unrecognizable, but still, when Steve catches his gaze, Billy sees the boy he could be, and the boy he wants, and he wonders that if he was anyone else, any other living, breathing person, if he'd be worth it - the fight, the wait, the understanding that few ever gave him.

When Steve stares at Billy, it's not pity, and it's not sadness but a cruel spiel of understanding like maybe Steve knows a little too well what it's like to simply exist without living.

And that scares Billy - for what that means, for what it encompasses, for his soul unfurling for the one person he never truly hated. Billy won't ask for forgiveness, but underneath, it feels like he doesn't have to, two fucked up people of their own accord, of the world's cruel twist of fate. He doesn't know how Steve feels about him, and that's okay. Assuming the worst will suffice, and he's too stubborn to approach whatever song and dance they've begun to build, but Billy will treat it with the fragility he never really learned to possess and hope against hope that whatever silent agreement they've come to

represent, will not break under the weight of either of their torment.

5. changes

rough is all billy knows how to be. rough with his hands, his emotions, his body, and his words. which is why he thought he could be the same with steve, that people work exactly like he does, all brittle and broken, masking pain and feelings that are too soft for any normal boy to feel.

which means billy knows how to break things, cuts and blood welling across the palms of his hands, or ashes and sand falling through the stretch of his fingers. it doesn't take him long to learn that it can't keep happening, that the glass edge he's become does no good in this new found land. not with icy brown eyes staring back at him when his tongue becomes the gavel, a promise, a revelation of how deep his words dig into fresh wounds.

so, billy rethinks what he knows, and he uses steve as a star and his actions as a guide, together as the starting point on a convoluted map buried beneath the turmoil that stuck so sweetly to his molting heart. little by little, it chips away as billy learns what's harsh and what isn't, until his rough demeanor quietly shines after each polish of effort.

it's a much awaited journey, one laden with despair and square ones, not always easy and certainly less than perfect. but with each refine, the foundation loosens, and billy's left with something new.

steve doesn't change billy, but he's certainly the reason he wanted to try.

6. the marshmallow

Notes for the Chapter:

inspired by all those posts wherein billy does not like to wear a coat because he's a stubborn cali.

for reference:



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billy never likes to wear a coat, even in the middle of winter because it disrupts the effort he puts into his look - a look he will never remotely admit takes time to perfect, but steve knows his routine like

the back of his hand.

but it's late at night now, and billy's huddled in his car, hands cupped against the vents because it's warm, and he's freezing, and steve thinks it's absolutely ridiculous that billy doesn't admit defeat. so much so to the point where sometimes steve gets a little dramatic about it, mad at billy because, "you can't just *not* wear a coat, hargrove. you'll freeze to death, and if that happens, *i'll* kill you, understand?"

he doesn't wait for billy's answer, cuts off the car and heads straight for his house because the boy he chose to spend his time with is foolish as hell, grinding on steve's last nerve because he just doesn't *listen* when steve only wants what's best for his boyfriend.

and when they get inside, steve pretends he doesn't see billy roll his eyes, teeth chattering as he stomps his boots on the mat by the door. the heater's still running, and steve quickly snatches the throw blanket off the couch before tossing it at billy. it's not entirely on purpose, maybe, but it hits the other boy in the face, producing a glare from him to which steve counters that with a simple, innocent shrug. "don't give me that look. you wouldn't be freezing if you weren't so stubborn, asshole." he emphasizes this by unzipping his jacket, thick and stupid, as billy had put it earlier, but certainly much more comfortable than billy's lack of warmth.

steve doesn't make a single comment about it again until several days later when they're parked on the outskirts of the woods, ready to head towards the cabin. it's another cold night, and steve wonders how he even survives every winter, the chill residing in his bones until the warmth of summer blooms in mid-may.

steve quirks a brow at billy, though, in that lovely *i told you* so manner billy's growing quite accustomed to because as it turns out, steve's right about a lot of things no matter how much billy doesn't want to admit it. so billy huffs, just about to accept defeat because the walk to the cabin will not be pleasant, when steve smiles. "i got you a present, honey," he says sickeningly sweet, climbing out of the car to open the trunk, shoving something into billy's hands when he rounds the side.

he unfolds it, expression morphing into something horrified as each second ticks by, finally realizing exactly what it is he's just been gifted.

"put it on or you can freeze to death. your choice," steve says, closing the boot of his car before taking off for the cabin. billy has half a mind to tell him to fuck off, but there's already flurries of snow falling to the ground, and the material does feel soft....

and billy absolutely does *not* stomp all the way to the house, bundled up in his new coat, grumbling after steve with, "why the fuck do i even like you. this is ridiculous and ugly as hell, harrington. fuck your taste."

"already did, babe," steve calls, grinning even though billy can't see it. the cabin eventually comes into view, steve climbing the stairs and only just briefly glancing back as billy shoves his hands into the pockets of the coat. it widens his smile, and steve doesn't even try to hide it as he watches billy pull the material tight around his body.

billy's still glaring through the falling snow, hair losing its style after the sleet melts, but the depth of his eyes have gone soft as he desperately works to maintain the scowl he generally uses to make people believe it's permanently tattooed upon his face.

he meets steve at the top of the stairs, brows furrowed, but bundled up tight, and steve simply presses the pad of his thumb between billy's eyes, rubbing away the lines on his face. "you can hate me all you want mr. cool, but practicality always wins," he says, briefly kissing billy despite the nip in the air and the chill of their lips.

and then just as quick, steve disappears inside the cabin, leaving billy questioning whether he should bury his pride so he can follow steve, or if he should cross dangerous territory by removing the coat.

in the end, billy's persona takes a nosedive; dustin won't shut up about the coat, and steve drinks his hot cocoa with delight sparkling in his eyes, happy as a motherfucking clam.

7. choices

Notes for the Chapter:

some of the dialogue is based on the mmfd bathroom scene, and the whole thing is based on [this](#) text post:

Billy has a hard time believing Steve loves him. His own father doesn't, so how could this perfect boy? He was Billy fucking Hargrove. He was chaos in human form. He was disaster. How could anyone love disaster?

Steve presses tender kisses into his skin, each one accompanied by a declaration of love, whispers sweet nothings in his ear, wraps his arms around him and doesn't let go. Billy allows himself to bask in this for a moment, but only a moment.

One day, Steve would wake up. Steve would open his eyes and see him for what he truly was. One day, Steve would get what he deserved. Who he deserved. One day, Steve would realize that he never truly really loved him.

“and when you go off to college and leave me behind-”

steve furrows a brow, cocks his head at the sudden undertone billy's voice takes on. he's scared, steve can tell, hides it behind machismo and nonchalance they both know steve has never fallen for. “what the fuck are you on about?”

billy only glances at him from the corner of his eye, can't even bring himself to face steve as he finally admits that, “you'll go off and live your life, and i hope for both of our sakes you forget this godawful town.”

but steve feels it, the flare of anger that licks his chest as billy, from the corner of the couch, subtly implies what their future mind hold if steve simply walked away because of inconvenient

circumstances. “you don’t get to do that,” he says, voice low and eyes narrowed, like glaring daggers at billy might drill some kinda sense into him.

it doesn’t work, though, because steve can’t read minds, and he sure as shit knows how hard of hearing billy is when he has something in his head, when it rattles around, stuck like a bird in a cage. he hadn’t thought this was a thing, maybe a fault of his own for not seeing the way billy clung a littler tighter when steve admitted that he’d sent off college applications, or when he suggested that living a nice life in a small apartment in a big city - a change of scenery from flat lands and hicks - might actually be nice. the bustle of cars and the lights from sirens always a reminder that there are definitely much bigger things out there than the small town of hawkins.

“do what?” billy asks in return, finally looking at steve. he comes off as confused, the innocent act a cue that he’s felt too much, exposed a nerve he hadn’t meant for anyone - let alone steve - to see.

“you can’t tell me who i can and can’t love, billy,” he says with finality, voice bitter. the ramifications of giving what they have up doesn’t settle favorable in his chest, actually curls a knife of pain right through it.

and steve knows he’s probably dramatic for letting such a meaning affect him so much, but he’s given this all he’s had, has never felt what easy might be like when two people actually care until now. “and if you think for a fucking minute i’m going to leave and fuck someone else, then you can go fuck yourself.”

he’s seething, a white hot rage at a million things - mostly at himself for not catching this sooner, at neil for putting so many nails in billy’s coffin of self-esteem, and any and all insufficiency that billy’s felt for years. steve can’t always fix things like he wants to, but if there’s one thing he can, it’s letting billy know that his audacity has run too far, and steve’s always had a say.

who was billy to take that away from him.

“it’s mine,” he says, watches as billy’s face falls, realizing exactly where steve’s frustration is coming from - not *at* billy but the ugly

truth of what billy had denied him in the midst of his inadequacy. "that's my choice. no one else's; not even yours."

it hurts to see billy full of guilt, turning away from steve to look at his hands. teeth digging into billy's lower lip is what does it for steve, the fall of his shoulders and the thick of tears at the corner of his eyes. "hey," steve says softly, nudging billy until he's got his attention again.

when he doesn't receive it, not right away, steve does the only thing he knows how to do. he crawls on top of billy, plants his thighs on either side of his waist and cups billy's face in his hands. "you'll remember that, won't you?" he asks. "the next time you think that."

billy may or may not be blinking back tears; he's always hidden his emotions well, but the shaky sigh he breathes out is enough of an indication for steve to understand that he's just as upset, just as twisted up about steve leaving, maybe even *forgetting*. "besides, can't leave you behind," steve presses on, brushing his thumb over the corner of billy's eye. "i love you too much for that."

somewhere in the mix, billy's hands have gripped steve's waist, and he feels the moment billy responds. it's not rough the way he curls his fingers into steve's sides, but the palms of his hands are warm and gentle.

just to meet him halfway, steve leans forward and presses his lips to billy's forehead, down the bridge of his nose, until he lands on his lips. and it may take a minute for billy to respond, but when he does, it's fierce, and it's clingy, and steve diverts his attention away from how much that breaks his heart by solely focusing on showing billy just how deep he's in this for.

and really, in the end, it's steve who hopes that forever isn't too much to ask.

8. questions

Notes for the Chapter:

based on [this](#) text post, which discusses the neglect that steve deals with from both of his parents and subsequently, everyone else:

#I'd love to see a fic where Steve's just at that emotional place where he feels like no one notices or cares about him #and then the first person to actually ask him if he's okay is Billy #because Billy recognizes neglect #and has seen his fair share of adults turning a blind eye to a struggling teen

billy asks steve if he's okay, and steve kinda pauses and tries for a smile, except it turns into a grimace. and he says, "yeah, i'm good."

and billy hums, steps in front of steve, who's just trying to leave the room. "lemme ask you again, pretty boy. i don't like liars," billy says, even though he's in steve's space, can see the annoyance between his brows. "are you okay?"

billy hargrove is nothing if not persistent, and in steve's growing frustration, he lets out a startled, "*no*, you asshole. i'm tired. school's fucking difficult, and if i'm not looking after a rugrat - *including* your sister - it's me at home alone twiddling my thumbs hoping the world doesn't catch on fire because *you* started it. so fuck off, billy, and leave me alone."

his bite is deep, but by the end of it, steve's shoulders fall at the weight of his confession. he'd laugh a few months ago, mostly at himself, if someone told him he'd easily hand billy a prod to poke him with - signed, sealed, delivered because he couldn't keep his mouth shut about how his head is filled with too much anxiety and pain and really, *loneliness*.

it's in many a moment that jealousy licks his throat, followed by mountains of guilt. it comes at peculiar times, like after he drops

dustin off and his mother sweetly greets them at the door to tell him *thank you* and *goodbye*. or when nancy says *see you tomorrow* and takes jonathan's hand, leaving steve alone in the hallway. or *especially* when there's group dinner and the only one that doesn't have a somebody is steve.

he does, however, have a house, empty and one he wants no part of. he also has a found family that cares, but only so much.

"you happy now?" he tries for mean, but that doesn't work when his tongue feels heavy. steve just wants away, *away* from this feeling, away from the box that's become his life. he doesn't want to go home, but his bed sounds like a nice place to be.

"c'mon, harrington," billy's nodding at the door, the one he's blocking until he shuffles on his feet. "you're coming with me."

"like hell i am, hargrove."

but billy crosses his arms over his chest, attempts intimidation even if everything about him reads otherwise. "we're gonna go get some food," he suggests, so unlike himself that steve's eyes narrow. "you look like shit, and hell if i'm going to let you fuck with the team because you can't take care of yourself."

it's the implication that does it, the twist in his chest that steve hadn't been prepared for, that lets him know that billy's not stupid by any stretch of the imagination. he's been close enough to steve to read the signs, the blue and purple bags that have made a home underneath his eyes, the tussle of his hair from lack of a brush, or the way his clothes no longer have the stamp of an iron because *what's the point?*

steve opens his mouth and wants to protest; he'd like to tell billy to fuck off again, but something gives, and maybe that makes him weak, but someone looking after him - and doing so in a way that doesn't directly address *feelings* - is exactly what he'd wanted. steve just hadn't expected it to come from billy.

and maybe there's a story to that.

steve sighs, and he takes a step before adding, "fine, but i want

greasy food *and* dessert.”

billy studies his face, if only for another moment, before grinning.
“i’ll get you anything you want. all you have to do is ask.”

9. searching

Notes for the Chapter:

from this anon: Paloma Faith's *Leave While I'm Not Looking* just shuffled by and I immediately got the idea of both Billy and Steve thinking this. For Billy (in his head) it's he's not good enough, not by half, so he imagines one day Steve will wise up and just leave. For Steve it's that Billy is a wild fire, so full of life and potential that Steve thinks he'd never be important enough to anyone to get them to stay with him.

billy knows he's not good enough for steve. those thoughts run in his mind so often when he fucks up, when steve's mad at him because he lost his temper and said something he shouldn't have or had an off day and got a little too snippy for his own good.

which, billy's always had problems, but he also doesn't really know that arguments are healthy sometimes, but he's always waiting for the other shoe to drop. he expects it to, and he's truly waiting for the moment that he's fucked up so bad, that steve will leave him for good.

but steve, god, he's heard about california, and he's seen billy in action. and he's a goddamn *sight* when he's filled with energy and joy, when he's protecting the ones he loves, or when he's driving a little too fast because at the core of it all, billy's a bit of a thrill seeker.

and steve's, well, a little boring, truth be told, always caught up in the flow of things, conforming to what people think he should be. he's learning to make up his own mind, and he's learning that he does have a say, and that his feelings *do* matter, too. but sometimes he can't keep up with billy; sometimes those drives are a little too much, and the excitement for a monster hunt weighs heavily on his shoulders in a way that fills his body with exhaustion.

and somehow, it's during those moments, deep in a forest on the

lookout, when their feelings spill on the edge of a cliff that might get them killed because the supernatural doesn't wait for anyone, let alone the steadiness that steve brings or the fire billy builds just by existing.

so steve mumbles into the night that, "i can't do this forever," because monsters *are* tiring, and he wants to protect people, of course, but he's mentally fragile from years of knowing a dark secret the world doesn't. he's got people to share that with, has billy, but he can't. can't think of the moment where he loses everything because they weren't careful. "i think i want a house- just somewhere quiet. somewhere not here," he says, not even knowing what he means, though the words still spill from his lips like he knows what he's doing, knows what he wants, and it's a miracle steve even chose to stay with billy for the simple fact that he's never been sure of what he's ever wanted to begin with.

steve's never had much of a plan, hadn't thought ahead because he didn't know who to turn to for those kinds of things. but with every day that passes, he thinks his vision of the future becomes clearer, the longer they stand out in the chill of the night, another year passing by and the same old shit haunting them, steve realizes that maybe whatever he's wanted has been there all along; he just didn't know it, vision hazy until suddenly, it's crystal clear. "but i don't think you want that," he finishes, pinning billy down with sad eyes. the boy's back is towards him, and steve's grateful the flush running up his neck isn't noticeable. "that's too normal, isn't it?"

"when have we ever been normal?" comes billy's gruff reply.

and steve snorts. "my point." because normality has left them long ago, left *him* long ago, the moment he'd ran back into that house, couldn't let nancy or jonathan die over a creature not of this world. "why would you want anything different."

he sees it, the moment billy freezes, the crunch of the leaves beneath his feet too loud for his ears, their breathing the only thing remaining. billy turns, a curious twitch of his lips. and steve grimaces at being *looked* at so deeply even if he can't see the deep blue of billy's eyes masked by the shadows of the trees. "you keep me grounded, steve harrington," he says, like he realizes the dilemma at

hand, like he knows steve inside and out, and it's not a surprise that he does. "i wouldn't feel alive if it weren't for you."

a shiver runs down his spine, an icy chill as the breeze brushes against his cheek, eyes locked on billy's. there's no lie there, no secret to unfurl because even in the dead of night, billy's never been anything less than serious when it comes to steve. and it might've taken a few times for him to realize that, just how devoted a man could be, but steve hadn't known that depth, not yet, until this moment, and he thinks that this is what it must feel like to have the world in the palm of his hand.

"it's always you," he says in return, knows that he doesn't have to, but if he can be vulnerable, let that go amidst the ominous underbelly of the world beneath their feet, then there's no other perfect time to do it. "and i'd make you sleep on the couch when you make me angry. it'd be comfortable, though. your back can't give out yet."

billy snorts and looks away for a brief moment, the itch of a smile sliding up onto his lips. "is that all i'm good for, then?"

"yes," steve replies automatically, but he's smiling too, bashful and tummy warm with butterflies. "who else is going to help me explore every bedroom thoroughly?"

this time, billy's lips fully stretch, a thinly-veiled smirk and heated eyes as a dark brow arches. he shuffles on his feet, that posture he likes to pull when he's feeling bold, and steve has no doubt that if billy had his cigarettes, he'd be blowing smoke into the wind. "this means you plan on keeping me?" comes billy's voice, cut through the air on the verge of teasing.

steve shrugs, feigns nonchalance, but he enjoys this, the tilt of a tightrope drawn too short. "for a very long time, hargrove," he says because his future looks grim without billy in it, resting too much faith on them making it. he'd been burned before doing that, got ahead of himself when he shouldn't have, but now feels different; now feels like it could be forever despite the insecurities that tend to crawl through his brain. "i just hope i don't slow you down."

and back to square one; steve should really have a counter for that, but billy's gaze doesn't fade. instead, he inches closer to steve, the moonlight bouncing off his shoulder, his face, his eyes, and breathing feels like something he's first learning. "funny that, harrington," he says, shoulders uncoiled and far from a version steve used to know. once again, billy splits him open like a goddamn book, reads every line and every nerve, and then steve's chin is cusped between fingers, the brush of a warm thumb against the bottom of his lip. "you're the only thing that keeps me on my toes."

it could, technically, be a lie. they're standing in the middle of goddamn nowhere hunting *demon dogs*, and steve's given away those so easily, but calloused fingers are warm against his skin, and billy looks about ready to *devour* him if he's not careful of his next move.

but steve's never been a smart man, and the wild in him might be dying with every new adventure that hawkins drags him into, but billy will always be the one he can't say no to. he's the one he loves, and even if validation has always been something he's sought from others, it's never quiet felt like this.

like a promise buried beneath another's ribcage, like an unspoken *i'd follow you anywhere*, steve sucks in a sharp breath, reaches for the lapels of billy's jacket and pulls him in until their mouths brush and heat burns them both, a fire they're unwilling to ever put out.

10. shortcomings

It shouldn't be like this, he thinks; he shouldn't feel like this because the distance between the dark and the light expanded through years of normalcy that's placed him back on the roadmap to what his life was before the unknown had wrapped its pretty little claws around his neck and *squeezed*.

Steve knows, by all accounts, that his chest shouldn't feel so tight anymore, that his breathing shouldn't stutter and hitch in the middle of the day when he's busy during work. He's focused, organized, a great employee with his own office, and the days go by like they ought to without a hiccup involved.

Except sometimes the walls close in, and his head feels foggy, and Steve's eyes dart between the corners of the room, then to the closed door, and he wonders if he should risk the anxiety for a peek, a simple look that might reflect all the things he knew, and all the things he's tried so hard to forget.

Steve, however, doesn't want to stare into the face of darkness.

With a shaky breath, Steve feels pinned to his chair, but he knows that today is a lost cause. There's only a simple cure for his pounding heart, shaky hands dialing a well-memorized number on his office phone. "Do you need anything from me today?" he asks, likes to think that his overachievements have placed a value on his status as contributing member to the office, buying extra freedoms he does well not to take for granted.

When the voice on the other end of the line gives him the okay, Steve barely remembers to reach for his coat, to pack his briefcase, to tidy his desk so it's set for tomorrow. His hands still shake, and his breathing is labored, and the only thing he hopes is that he can make it home without feeling lightheaded. The distance between his house and the city isn't far, a compromise between himself and the person he loves because too far felt like Hawkins and too invested in the busy streets felt like smothering.

Steve walks through the door of the house in no less than twenty

minutes, and while he nags about the proper places for objects, he forgoes that now, shoes flying off his feet, tie discarded across the floor leading to the stairs. His shirt and pants quickly follow until he reaches the bathroom, hand fumbling between hot and cold because the ache in his ribs doesn't feel like either, and there's no way to pinpoint which might sleuth the problem from his pores. It's an itch he can't scratch, tears welling at the corner of his eyes until they're washed away by the spray of water that hits his face as soon as he's decided that *hot* is the best contender for agitation.

Steve breathes, at least he tries to, the steam fogging up the window above the shower. Surely his reflection in the bathroom mirror will go too once he's finished, the only place he's found that helps drown out any and all white noise that rattles between his ears.

The water's loud, fresh and clean against his skin, and Steve stands there until he turns red from the undercurrent of hope that maybe he's not as crazy as he feels.

It isn't until he hears the click of the door that he startles, eyes refocusing to the tile before him. He knows who it is, hadn't bothered to announce he was home because the building pressure had been much more compelling and insistent in its insidious design to make Steve feel like he'd combust than come down off a jittery high that's only ever been temporary.

The curtain of the shower pulls back, the rings sliding against metal, and a rush of cool air hitting his skin. Goosebumps prickle across his skin, but the water is still warm enough to evade any discomfort he might feel from it.

Billy's fingers against his skin make Steve sigh, gentle and caring across the bow of his back. He's joined in a moments time, the slide of another body so close to his easing whatever transfixed his anxiety. Before, he'd kept that hidden, done everything to evade questions and tempt fate by taking care of his *problem* by masking lightheadedness, ignoring the painful grip in his chest.

It's the dizziness that caught him red-handed, psyched himself out enough that the room spun, and when Steve had lost his balance, he'd been lucky Billy was there to catch him.

Which sometimes makes him angry, the dependence he has on this room, on Billy when he thinks he ought to take care of it himself, that many other people in the world deal with the same travesty as he and yet they manage perfectly fine. But Steve also knows that his was borne out of something much different, not a general panic or socially anxious call when around other people. His happens in the depth of his mind, where the darkness creeps in like the tide, edging forward until it hits, and Steve's left like this, left feeling like *this*. "I didn't know you were home," he manages, but he relaxes, as much as he can, in Billy's embrace. His fingers brush against his body in kindness, in all areas, shapes and words etched into the water sliding off of him. "Did I wake you?"

Billy hums, chin dropping down onto Steve's shoulder as he presses a kiss into the crook of his neck. "No, you didn't. Scared me for a moment, though."

There's no time for regret, not when his breathing is still labored, but he hopes that Billy hadn't been worried. Steve doesn't think sometimes when he's like this, not that he can when he's preoccupied and one-track minded. It's difficult, and he's talked about it before, surprised that Billy had simply said he'd understood.

"Sometimes when I think about him," he'd said, and there hadn't been a need for a name, not when Steve leaned in and kissed him good, delved right into making Billy forget because hurting was enough, but adrenaline from panic is something else entirely.

"You're home early," Billy says softly, his breath dry against the water dripping from his hair. There's no judgment there, just curiosity even though Steve's sure Billy already knows the answer.

But it's an attempt, at least, to bring this full circle, for Steve to focus on something different than the vines that linger. They may not physically exist in the realm of this world, not anymore when the last one died a shriveled, painful death, but that doesn't mean they don't spike his mind with torturous thoughts, latch on like leeches to his worries, his fears, his worst nightmares.

"I was fine," he replies because he was. Steve had a normal morning; he woke to the sound of his alarm – to both of their disdain – gotten

dressed, eaten a quick breakfast, made sure to kiss Billy goodbye because the thought of leaving without doing so had never been an option in his book. "But then- I don't know."

"Tell me what you did today," Billy hums, pulling back from Steve. He remains close, but his fingers press into his back, kneading the muscles that Steve hadn't realized were so tense.

"You know half of it already." The mornings are the same, though the weekends tend to differ, and there's only an allotted time they see each other after Steve gets off work because Billy's schedule at the bar is far from ideal, but it helps pay the bills, and it's the compromise they made *together*. "Dressed, ate, had to leave you."

Billy whines, "I hate that part."

And Steve laughs, a small huff because he does too, and if there's anything to be grateful for, any good that comes out of his worries, is that Steve's worked hard for the leeway that he gets, says something that he can leave in the middle of the day on the off chance he can't take any more of the pressure.

It's not normal, but it works, and he'll make up everything he missed today in a matter of hours.

Til then, Steve turns in Billy's arms, and he doesn't know what he wants to say, but feels it on the tip of his tongue. He blinks up at Billy through the wet of his lashes and gives him a smile, a reassurance that he's fine, and it's not until this moment that he realizes how much easier it is to breathe again. "I'm sorry I worry you," he says instead, in place of *love*, in place of *thank you*. Steve's not usually one to choke on words; that's more Billy's forte, but the weight of his issues hangs heavy between them, no cure for the kind of monsters that visit him.

But Billy shrugs like he doesn't care, and Steve knows he really doesn't. He's more worried, if anything, that he won't be able to help, that his presence won't work or he'll end up useless. Steve shakes his head, and he answers that question in one go, because right here and right now, there's only room for one freak out, and Steve's filled the capacity for it today.

“I just want to know you’re okay.” Billy’s whisper hits him hard, as if Steve’s hearing it for the first time. He could lie and say that there’s only water on his face, that there aren’t tears leaking from blood-shot, tired eyes, but it’s hard to fake that here, and Steve likes it when he doesn’t have to hold himself together like a duct-taped cardboard box on the verge of collapsing.

Right now, he doesn’t know if he has an answer for Billy. He feels better than he did, but there’s still weight on his shoulders that might take him awhile to forget. Until then, Steve shuffles into Billy’s space, no room between them while the water runs lukewarm behind him.

Steve presses his face into Billy’s chest, lets the other boy’s arms curl around his frame, and refuses to mask the first sob of emotions that hit him so suddenly. Steve’s cried over a lot of things, both good and bad, but he thinks how lucky he can cry from happiness, too.

11. tracing

Steve's learned discretion when around Billy, when they're in public or when they're alone.

But not in the sense of cautiously scared.

Steve tracks his movements with delicate ease, as if Billy might spook if he moves too fast for his liking.

Which is why it's slow between them when they aren't fucking. Words don't embellish their time; it's necessity at most, a feeble clause to their unspoken agreement.

It's always small gestures that Steve initiates, too nervous to take it further. Starts with caressing Billy's hand, fingers tracing bone and the length of veins that run steady.

If not for that, then it's Billy's hair, Steve's knuckles brushing against a tanned shoulder. He twirls a curl before releasing, watches the buoyancy as it settles back into place; like a tightly packed coil, Steve thinks that's his favorite.

But he does this so often, so creative and new, he sometimes forgets it's a habit; trained himself on his own volition to seek Billy's warmth like he's the calm before a raging storm. The energy Steve holds crackles beneath his fingertips, igniting a tumultuous spark the moment he accesses bare skin.

With every touch, he's astonished that Billy lets him do this, lets Steve trace the contours of his collar, lets him sketch words into the depths of his ribs. Billy breathes no objections between them, so Steve continues like a passenger on a voyage. He charts Billy's face like a mother does a child, tempting sleep on the brink of consciousness, down the bridge of his nose and over the cupid's bow of pretty pink lips. Billy nips when he thinks Steve isn't serious.

Steve paints lines across cheekbones, across the thick of dark brown brows, and reserves Billy's finely cut jaw for the last of his endeavors.

There's no reason he does it, not a carefully crafted plan he implemented to make himself feel something, to make *Billy* feel something, but Steve had reached across the threshold of agitation with careful hands, ready for the pull and push of a magnet too strong. Like maybe Billy would turn him away if Steve dare lay a finger on him outside their agreement, formable and provocative in notion.

But the nights grow longer and the bed warmer, daylight slipping into luminescence. That's when Steve draws, commits the texture to memory, the dips and curves weaved beautifully with solace and content. Steve knows of Billy's reluctance, the tick of *hands* in no shape close to compassion.

So, Steve bores the liquid and drinks from the glass, never expecting reciprocation; he dedicates his time, his thoughts, his body to a boy who doesn't speak with clarity, who squints in the dark when Steve hums alongside his decorations. The patience between them speaks volumes, and Steve loves this kind of learning, hopes that maybe his message won't ever be rescinded.

Because of this, he doesn't ask Billy for changes, doesn't expect any intricacies for his pursuits. What they have is fine-tuned and enacted, a place only for themselves. Billy is safe when he's with Steve, that message loud and clear, and Steve does his best to let him know that he's waiting, and it's only for Billy's taking.

So, when Billy first touches, reaches out for Steve, he looks like he doesn't know what he's doing. His fists tore flesh, made bruises burn bright, and Steve watches as Billy falters. But with knowledge of his own, Steve takes his hand and settles it close, spreads Billy's fingers across his chest. It's a love note of sorts, when his palm spreads wide, lets the warmth sink down into his heart; it's Steve's earnest way of showing Billy that he's *alive* and so very well-rested.

Steve kneads Billy's hand just to loosen the tendons, breathes quietly into the night. It's not until he's halfway into sleep that he feels the tug of absolution, where Billy unfolds their position. Billy turns with practiced ease, lets his fingers roam, and traces without any direction.

12. playing

Notes for the Chapter:

from this prompt: Billy is a player, has always been and will always be a player. Steve knows that, everyone knew that. Still, Steve let himself be played with.

It'd been lust, he thinks, knew it the moment he let Billy Hargrove pounce. It didn't have to mean anything except for a roll in the sheets, a chance to let off some steam. The tension was burdensome, accumulated from taking the promoted position he'd worked so goddamn hard to pilfer from lackeys with silver spoons in their mouths - just the type Steve loved to hate.

Of course, he'd been a trust fund baby, too, but luck spit him out of the wrong hand. He'd been forced to make a decision, one that cost him quite dearly.

Handing back the keys of his car to start his own life felt good, a breath of fresh air, fumbled along the way while rolling over the basics everyone already knew. There were a lot of things in Steve's life that exposed his previous wealth, but nothing knocked him down a peg like grinding and making it to the top. It landed him here, in this grand ole city, a view unlike any other.

An office like no other.

A co-worker like no other.

He'd heard the whispered rumors, the mumbles about the latest tryst, but Steve wasn't looking for love unless someone was offering. He ignored it quite well, recruited his time to other important matters.

Matters that swept him off his feet like the offer that came with a name, an imprint he ran that he'd kindled with nothing but fire and love. It flooded the market in a matter of weeks, landed him crucial contracts that boosted his namesake. Fortunately, it always left his bosses smiling.

When he was younger, Steve had never been decent at the written word, but he had the ability to recognize pure gold in his hands. So, with welcomed charm, he made sure to return it with offers no client could refuse. Steve's crafted culmination of every goal he'd ever had only landed him recognition.

And more importantly, it landed him Billy's attention.

He'd been curious at first, the coffee proliferated into morning notes, a curious case of distinguished writing, post-its full of admiration for all the hard work Steve contributed to the office. It's not as if Steve hadn't seen Billy around, could acknowledged a man so impeccably dressed, but their paths stayed clear, and Steve ignored whatever hearsay that infiltrated the weekly gossip.

Well, not until Billy walked into his office and smiled so sweetly and asked, "Are you busy?"

Steve had been wary, of course, when they were situated on opposite sides of the office, different products eating the hours of their day. Employee meetings and shoulder brushes had been the extent of their conversations. Steve had always been loath to eventually admit that he'd more than noticed, but he could recognize a pretty face. Could somehow admit defeat that his type was flawed, but only in the sense that he'd always had a weakness: disingenuous beings who played him for food and left him awry and dwindling.

Steve knew that smiling back at Billy would do more than seal his fate.

"No," he said, as if the paperwork piled up over the weekend wasn't winking at him from the corner of his desk. Steve glanced at it only twice before offering Billy a sweet smile in return, finishing with, "Do you need something?"

A grin is what he got for his efforts, a flick of tongue and brilliant white teeth. Steve knew better than to ignore the extra beat in his chest.

Instead, he let Billy sit there a moment, across from his desk while the quiet skewed due to chatter, the halls of the building eerily

occupied by ringing and clacking of new shoes on tile. “I’ve got a proposal,” Billy said, gauging Steve’s demeanor. Billy’s imprint swelled with too much pride, hits and very little misses. His subjects ranged from poetics to classics, staples marketed for best sellers.

Steve, while new, stuck with the boring, quite liked the depth he could find. Often, he found solace in much of the nonfiction.

And yet, the twinkle in Billy’s blue eyes let him know that he had something special, an offer that would do them both good. It only read way past the point of cautiously optimistic, where Steve could feel his blood burn warm.

“And I’m the first person you thought of?” Because guarding himself in a minefield worked best, especially if Billy were at play. Steve had no reason *not* to trust Billy, but there was no reason to give him everything either.

Though, the joke had been on him from the very beginning.

“No,” Billy replied, but he said it with a shrug, air of nonchalance that proposed that Steve shouldn’t take it personally. It’s the matter of business, the way of the world, so Steve nodded like he wasn’t itching with indignation. “But I think you’re exactly what we’re looking for.”

A meeting on Friday, well after work, landed Steve in the middle of the city, a fancy restaurant in another language and a table selected by the chef simply because of connections. The man they met was old and gray, whiskers white around the mouth. Unfortunately, he had the tendency to slip his hand over Steve’s in the middle of any and all suggestions.

Quite quickly he knew what he’d been roped into, and thank god Steve had been smart enough to figure it out, because when the man left, Steve turned to his side, and said, “You’ll do better than to use me next time.”

Billy had laughed, a rough sort of trill, and settled back into the booth. Idly, he stalled, watched the leftover food grow cold, til his gaze flicked up to meet Steve’s. “He likes them young, and he was

bored of me, but guess what? We won.”

Indeed, they had, a new shiny client on fresh, crisp white paper. It felt good holding it, delivering it to his boss, if only because Billy had been too gracious. “I don’t need the extra favors, and I’ll give you this leg up. It’s my apology,” he said, sincerity dripping with distortion.

Steve knew the kind that played that game, rough around the edges, no qualms in dipping their toes on the lines of ethics. Particularly if it meant everything was theirs for the taking. And yet, he discarded his caution, swelled a little in the head, and from there on out, an unlikely partnership began.

It helped his imprint, saved Steve from the chopping block and progressed his advances via checks. He dwelled in the stories and made friends in the office, a life well worth living.

But underlying his success had always been a curious creature, an unspoken detail he couldn’t quiet place.

That is, until Billy initiated his crucifixion.

Steve had kissed him one night, another deal, another success; a congratulatory drink had turned into three, and from the moment Steve fell into Billy’s bed, he’d thought he’d been safe from his clutches.

Mixing business and pleasure never ended well; he’d seen countless faults in the cracks, damaged relationships, several steps down the career ladder, but Billy’s tongue felt wet, cock even warmer, and it was so *easy* to forget.

Until time ticked by and a new hire showed, Steve well on his way to security, Billy found him less, greeted him shyly, and then eventually ignored him completely.

It didn’t hurt, per se, but he wasn’t special, should’ve knocked that sense into himself ages ago. But he’d seen what a body like that could do, and Steve knew better than to fall for the wolf in sheep’s clothing.

13. princess

"steve's been demoted now," billy says, voice echoing across the locker room. "can't be a king if he won't take back the crown."

"fuck off, hargrove," steve says, pulling a clean shirt over his head, doing his best to ignore billy's playful grin.

"feisty, aren't you?" but steve's real damn good at ignoring those taunts, has been through enough bullshit in his life not to let billy under his skin, and if he thinks that humiliating him in front of all his peers after basketball practice, of all places, is going satisfy whatever need he has to win, then steve supposes he can step aside and just leave it.

"shouldn't completely revoke it," comes tommy's voice from the other side of the room, a cackle following his suggestion. and when steve looks over, billy's brows are near his hairline, actually impressed by tommy for what's most likely the first time.

"suppose you're right," he agrees. "legends are always remembered for their fall."

steve tries hard not to grind his teeth together, feels the tension knot in his shoulders and does his best to tidy his locker before slamming it shut. his ears ring, and he's just plain exhausted. so, he flips billy off and begins to head out of the locker room so he can go home and *sleep*, when he hears the final remnants of a debate featuring whatever god-awful bullshit billy and his crew will no surely dub him worthy of.

the next day, there may or may not be a plastic tiara taped to his locker with a very clear word written across the top of it: princess.

14. pieces

Notes for the Chapter:

from this hc: Tell me Picking Up The Pieces by Paloma Faith isn't about Billy being self conscious about Steve's last person was Nancy. Nancy who got justice for Barb, who kicks ass, who doesn't take shit, but is still kind and smart and sweet. Billy's like "how the hell am I supposed to follow that?" He sees the way Steve still smiles at her during family dinners and even tho he says he's over her, that he loves her but isn't in love with her anymore, Billy still feels intimidated. Everyone loves her and they only tolerate him. It's painful and ass backwards because Joyce may be Will's mom but Billy's her favorite addition to the group. The way he protects will when he's picked on. Or talks Jane through her waking nightmares. Or spoils Dustin with a couple extra bucks at the arcade. He's loved he's just insecure.

billy doesn't often show himself as multi-faceted. he's content with the exterior of rough around the edges, though he's softened, if only a little, because steve's played with the jagged edges that outlined his body like chalk on pavement. he's bled for billy's sake, and there's no way a man comes out the same, on the other side of forgiveness and redemption looped and laced into the ties that bind them together.

their trust is on solid ground, and billy's thankful the leash has given him that length, but he walks on eggshells around the others, thinks in *sorrys* and flinches when he's around steve's family because the brunt of who he used to be still lingers in soft eyes, in gentle little beings who are too well adapted to the horrors another dimension has offered.

when billy looks at max, all he sees is fire and gumption, the freckles on her cheeks a new star constellation that's led to kindness in her eyes despite the months of turmoil he lit underneath her feet.

when billy looks at lucas, he thinks of knights and their armor, the sarcasm no more or less than a deflection of self-care for himself and for others. but he uses it wisely, a cautionary tale, and billy would tell him he's proud if he had any courage.

when billy looks at mike, he thinks of leadership and criticism, a puzzle with too many pieces. he ticks like a clock, well-timed and wary, and it serves a purpose when they need the outspoken.

when billy looks at the byers', a cluster of three, he sees a red string and family and knows they were always meant to be. joyce has unlimited kindness, even when strung out on anxiety, and jonathan is only a link, like a window holding the walls together, a calm when there's too much storm. and the storm that often follows is will despite his quiet nature and not one of his own doing.

when billy looks at jane, he thinks of war and the mighty who have not fallen, still curious in her gestures and eager to learn, a walking sponge so ready to read the world into oblivion. she eyes him mostly, and smiles at him, too, maybe the friendliest person to billy aside from steve. there's no reason to have earned that, not with his history laced with violence, but her words dominate with so much conviction, he's learned long ago not to fight.

when billy looks at dustin, he sees green. green like a forest of trees, tame and wise in all the years they've witnessed the world age. he's gentle and supportive, and he loves too much, but he's thrilled with curiosity and eagerness only boy-ish youth can offer.

but when billy looks at nancy, he sees his downfall for the taking. and he can't exactly pinpoint her stride. but what he does know is that she's loved for all that she is, and she's never had to apologize. billy can't admit that he's jealous, can't say he's insecure because he knows, deep down, that if it came to the two, that steve would always choose her. not born from that kind of love, but one tender of friendship kept kindled, the kind that won't flicker because death had been at their door.

and it makes billy snort, smoke in the air when he wonders how he ended up here. at a whole-in-the-wall cabin with people he admires, who look at him quiet differently because steve had asked them to,

wonders when small favors won't hold him so tightly because buying their love is the only thing he's got, the price he'll pay to stay. he's not like nancy or max, and he's sure as shit not like joyce. hell, he's not like any of the boys, and billy knows he's not like hopper. the stamp he's left just doesn't fit. but it's in the moments of shared glances that he thinks maybe, just maybe, he's wrong.

15. accidents

Notes for the Chapter:

started from a prompt i made about steve burning dinner and billy's the firefighter on call. then it progressed to another prompt by a lovely anon with: what IF Steve goes to make them cookies as a thanks/apology and he sets off his smoke detector AGAIN and then billy has to come back and steve is all flustered trying to explain why there's smoke flooding his kitchenette and Billy's all "you know you don't have to burn down your apartment just to see me"

steve knows that his oven and the rest of his kitchen *shouldn't* billow with smoke clouds, but he guesses it's the price he pays for clearly dealing with a faulty timer. he knew, for sure, he shouldn't've trusted the buttons on the microwave. the thing is senile and a little wonky sometimes, but steve's lived in this apartment for so long, it's second nature to click a button, watch the numbers count down and hope that it beeps before anything burns.

and god, did his cookies *burn*.

it's a sign, maybe, that steve is to prepare for a future in embarrassment because that's what he feels deep in his bones after he's opened all the windows, turned on the ceiling fan, and done his best to ignore the knocking on the door before the insistent pounding let him know that *no*, he was not escaping another round of witnesses.

steve opens the door to a very concerned firefighter, blonde and blue-eyed, who gently nudges steve out of the way as he takes one step into the apartment, assessing the situation, and gathering the courage to step into what's left of the cloud of smoke that's dissipated, if only somewhat.

"nothing caught on fire," he says meekly, ignoring the other firefighter standing in the doorway who was clearly here last time

and is in no way impressed. that's probably not the best attitude to have when called out for a potential fire, but then again, he's probably well aware of how much of a dumb-ass steve is - which just means that he's wasting their time *again*. "i'm sorry about this."

the firefighter in his apartment taps a button on the microwave, a fan whirring to life; steve grimaces because he'd forgotten about that, too.

fuck, he really is all over the place today.

"i was just trying to bake cookies," he explains when he meets the firefighter half way once he's finished his inspection. luckily, there hadn't been a fire, and steve's grateful for that, but what he's not grateful for is the amused smile on this man's face. steve already feels ridiculous, and this guy isn't helping.

especially when he opens his mouth and says, "for who? the devil. i'm sure he likes them burnt."

caught between a laugh and a grimace, steve crosses his arms and bites the corner of his bottom lip to keep from laughing nervously. "fair point," he says, blinking up at a pretty face who's smile has settled for fond, the crinkles at the corner of his eyes a dead giveaway that he's not mad about a false alarm unlike his partner shuffling in the hallway. "but no," steve shakes his head, waving his hand absentmindedly towards the kitchen, the very room that's suffered enough inhalation for a lifetime "for the last time."

an attempt at the casual falls through the seams like liquid, voice small and cracked. steve hadn't exactly planned on telling this man, or anyone else for that matter, that the cookies were for the hassle the last time they'd been called out. but it's out there now, a gesture, in hindsight, he thinks looks a little ridiculous.

"you know," comes a voice, wafting through steve's thoughts, drawing his attention directly to this stranger's mouth. his lips are pretty and pink, white teeth, long lashes, and the most gorgeous blue eyes steve has ever seen, fanned by long, thick lashes. he attempts to listen, knows he'd been a sputtering mess when he'd opened his door the last time in nothing but sweatpants and a t-shirt. he hadn't been

ready for visitors, and his hair certainly looked like a rat's nest.

not that that ever should've been the main priority when his apartment coughed up black fumes, but *still*. it's the principle of it all.

either way, steve shuffles on his feet as the man continues and proceeds to pull the rug out from underneath him.

"you don't *have* to burn down your apartment just to see me."

steve's eyes go wide, takes in the smirk that slowly slides across the firefighter's face. "i-" he tries, blushing red at the implication, at the audacity, at the *flutter* of dumbfounded astonishment. "that's not- *i wasn't*-" because steve really, *really* wasn't trying to cause a plight. rather, he'd been hoping to do something nice without it trying to backfire so miserably. so, so *what* if he'd thought about this man after he'd left; that didn't have to mean anything. "it was just-" but steve knows the truth, and lying to himself does him no favors, shoulders falling with worry etched into his brow.

"i'm off shift tomorrow night," the firefighter interrupts, half decent enough to shrug as an apology. but he looks hopeful next to that, eyes roaming steve's face, deep and familiar like before when he'd told steve that he should be more careful.

clearly, steve hadn't heeded that advice, but it's definitely landed him in peculiarities and whatever the hell was going on right now.

"the cookies off eighth street are damn good, by the way," the man continues, licking his lips. steve could probably guess that it's in anticipation - though the root of the cause defies steve even though he has many a guess. presumptions have never been his forte, and steve's already had enough mortification for his liking. "only if you're still looking to impress."

"you want me to come by tomorrow?" steve says, spells it out plainly because he doesn't have time for misunderstandings, let alone for extremely handsome firefighters that insist on being the one to open his door, reveling in his failures, and looking at him like *that*.

"for dinner," the firefighter says with a wink, quick but full of

confidence. “without smoke, might i add.”

steve huffs a laugh, running his fingers through his hair. “but with desert,” he affixes for good measure, the full scope of being asked out a pleasant thrum throughout his body. “and not made for the devil.”

this time, steve watches the man duck his head and snicker at his feeble attempt at a joke. but it makes steve feel funny, the kind he tends to get when he’s nervously excited, full of butterflies and hopefulness he knows he probably shouldn’t have.

“I don’t know; he might just be named billy.”

“billy,” steve softly repeats, rolling the name off his tongue like it could be an added, permanent fixture in the future. it might be nonsensical to think as such, but steve had wondered before, hadn’t the chance to grab a name as a more appropriate *thank you* for how careful and considerate billy had been for the inconvenience of a false alarm. “thank you,” he finally tacks on, feels the relief of doing the appropriate dance across his shoulders.

they stare for a moment, if only that, steve foregoing the other end of pleasantries as he’s stuck on billy’s gaze. it may be a good thing when the disruption comes in the form of a cleared throat.

“we should get going.”

it startles billy, too, blinking away from steve. he watches as seriousness takes over, almost like the mask of transparency slid from view because it was solely for steve. that, in and of itself, makes him bite the inside of his cheek, awareness blooming across the expanse of his mind. “steve,” he says as introduction, though it’s clear they hardly need anything else past that. he’s quick, though, can’t let billy leave without it in return. “you already know where i live, so-”

“I’ll see you at seven,” he offers, that smile back on billy’s face, if only for a moment. he reaches forward with careful consideration, squeezes steve’s wrist before letting go, then brushes past his shoulder for the front door.

steve watches him leave, trailing behind his partner in a bulky, off-

yellow uniform while wondering how the fuck something so bad turned into something so promising.

16. thicker

Notes for the Chapter:

based on [this](#) text post: why aren't there any stories where billy fingers steve to orgasm and tells him what a good boy he is?

billy's fingers are *thick* when they open steve up, wet with lube, caressing in such a way that makes his thighs shake with want. billy takes his time, one finger at first until steve had whispered *more, billy* into the seedy air around them. and now steve's got three fingers up his ass, and billy's being a tease, but it feels so good, and he feels so full when he grinds down for that extra pull of pleasure.

billy hums when he watches steve hips, perched precariously between his legs, mouthing at a sweat-slicked thigh that's already stirring with bruises billy had sucked right into steve's skin. they range in color, from blues and purples, deep green and yellow when billy had put his lips at the juncture between hip and thigh days ago, determined to let sensuality fuel steve's orgasm right from him than rely solely on his cock.

he'd whined, steve groaning with frustration because it wasn't enough, but billy had pinched him and told him to wait. and wait he had, steve spilling over the edge by the mere proximity of billy's mouth on him, breath warm and tingly.

it's similar to now, only this time billy's graced him with fingers against nerves and only that. he refuses to put his mouth on steve, feels his cock twitch in anticipation from wet heat that won't come. "*billy,*" he whines, frantically, the only leverage he'd had gone still by billy wrapping his hand around his hip, keeping him in place as his fingers push forward into steve.

"c'mon, pretty boy," he says, voice rough with want, with admiration. "i know you can. just a little further."

they've not played around with edging, at least not often, and billy had promised that he wouldn't now. but it feels an awful lot like it

when steve just wants to curl his toes, let his cum fall warm against flushed skin.

but billy leans down, so close to his aching member, mouth too close to his balls, and yet, it's still not close enough. billy's fingers fuck him gently, nudging that spot inside him before pulling away, and steve could cry with want, sensitive and unsatiated for an orgasm that leaves his nerves on fire.

"almost there, baby," billy tells him, must feel the way steve squeezes around him, muscles tensing.

steve let's out a sob, bites the inside of his wrist, keeps himself from whimpering aloud. billy doesn't even let him have that luxury, though, as he gently removes his hand from steve's hip, sliding it around his delicate wrist just to hold him. "lemme hear you, steve," he says softly but with authority.

steve cracks his eyes open, had squeezed them shut in concentration at the prospect of potentially cuming too soon. he realizes he should've known better because if there's anything billy loves more, it's stretching steve out like a piece of cloth, molding, mending, caring to the point where he's much too thin for coherency.

on most, and on many occasions, steve loves that, just not when he wants to be fucked, that selfish need plugged into desperate cries. "billy," he says, dropping his voice like that ought to pin the other boy in place. it doesn't work, however, not when steve's voice cracks at the end, not when he begs, "want you to fuck me."

a gentle smirk is what he's met with, followed by another thrust of billy's fingers. "i am."

"that's not-" steve tries, wants to finish with *what i meant*, but that falls off the tip of his tongue as billy flicks his wrist with more rigor, rough in flow, sharpening steve's senses. his cock seeps with pre-cum, neglected and flushed from the tease steve's suffering, wishing he could wrap his hand around himself and simply squeeze.

almost as if he's sensed steve's thoughts, billy squeezes steve's hand, doesn't let go as he takes steve's forefinger into his mouth. billy's

gentle when he wants to be and rough in all other areas, but the pulsing of his tongue around steve's digit is a message of talent left wasted on the wrong thing.

although that seems to stir something in steve, that climbing pleasure rising quickly as he stares at billy's mouth, lips pink and swollen, rounded around his finger until billy releases him with a pop.

"it's gonna be so good, steve," billy teases, finally letting go of steve's hand, dipping back down to gently lick the head of his cock.

steve bucks up, gasps at the contact, but that's all he gets, billy's blue eyes beaming with mirth when he pulls all the way out of steve, only to fuck right back in. "show me how good it is, baby."

which means he's just as impatient as steve, just as eager to watch him fall apart. steve wishes he could say he hasn't been pushed to that limit yet, wishes he could convince billy that what he really needs is his hard cock, that billy's attempts at teasing don't do enough for him. but that's a lie, and they both know it. steve knows it as billy relentlessness presses up against his tight heat, rubbing, whispering against skin gone warm and pliant underneath his touch.

steve moves his hips, even if it isn't much, just to match billy's fingers, to match his motion. the desire, as heavy as it was before, increases twice-fold, pleasure spilling, leaking, trailing throughout his nerves, down his spine. steve's toes finally curl, thighs going rigid and cock blurting out droplets of cum that land against his tummy.

letting that wave wash over him, steve hardly notices billy on him again, tongue mouthing at his cock, lapping up whatever's left until he suckles gentle at the tip. it's too much and yet not enough, steve squirming until he realizes that billy's still inside him, pulling out just enough to trace his puckered, fucked-out hole.

he moans, feels the sweat against his skin, hears it when billy slides off his cock and licks at the cum steve left behind. the low hum vibrate deeply, sends a chill all the way up his shoulders, and when steve finally blinks past the hazy glow of sex, he watches as billy brings his fingers to his mouth, tongue darting for a quick taste of *steve*.

“you’re such a good boy, baby,” he says lowly, rests his eyes upon steve like he hadn’t just devoured him. “always so good for me.”

steve, despite the embarrassment, preens at the glory, cheeks blooming with color until he makes grabby hands at billy. “c’mere,” he says under his breath, voice raw and scratchy. just like steve had followed orders, billy does, too, climbing over steve until he’s on top of him.

with nothing more than a smile, steve reaches up, slots his lips over billy’s, and kisses him deeply until he thinks he’s not boneless enough for another round that will most certainly leave him fulfilled and fervent for anything else billy has to offer.

17. nonessential

Notes for the Chapter:

based on [this drabble](#) that had these lines: "Moving to Hawkins was probably the best thing to ever happen to him because he met Steve. Hell, Billy sometimes wants to thank his sorry excuse of a dad for making that decision."

billy's not quite sure he could ever thank his father for anything in his life, not after the hell he'd been through with him, a tumultuous relationship built on trepidation and fear, hardwired into billy's frame that grew from brittle battles of words and fists. should he be thankful, grateful to a man who gave him life, gave him half of his body, half a lung to breath in this world, only to steal it again when billy least expected it? when he fucked up in ways he didn't know how, when he spoke too sharply and the panic leapt from the bottom of his stomach into the cavities of his throat?

billy wouldn't have been surprised if one day it had slit right down the seam, a trickle of agony that'd only make his father alight with delirium because power was a trip to behold.

and billy had felt that, once upon a time, what it meant to let loose the self-contained, restricted part of his basis, pulsing at the vein of whiplash and thrill because it was the only thing that kept him alive, kept him moving in circles until the ground wore too thin, until the only solace he had was a stepping ground for worn down shoes and bloodied feet.

the difference between then and now is that billy has steve, a saving grace, like an angel on the mantel keeping a close eye if there ever was a wrong turn. billy knows that steve isn't responsible for him, but billy makes sure that he keeps himself in check *because* of steve, *for* steve, thrives on that red string of fate and the day it might be cut because the walk across it is so tight, he could slip and fall at any moment.

and while that journey is difficult, and billy slips up with angry

words and scabbed knuckles, he thanks the universe for steve, and he thanks his father for the brutality that ran its course so he knows the difference between heaven and hell, that even purgatory is a much better place to reside than the side of the tracks he'd been living on before.

billy laughed at the notion, though, at the acidity in his tone when he'd told steve in the middle of the night - the undercurrent of tension running itself along his veins, wound up on anger because bad days still happened - that his father had only ever given him three things that he could be thankful for, and even then it was such a twist of a knife to admit that aloud, to let steve see him swallow the ball of bitterness down, push past the pride and the victim that coexisted between the cage of his ribs because that'd always be a staple to his name.

"you don't have to," steve had said, felt the inkling of hostility radiating off of billy. but it hadn't been at him, per se, as much as it was for the circumstance. that normality left them both along ago when monster's peaked out from under the bed and resurfaced into nightmares that traveled far behind the shadows.

"but i do," billy replied with a shrug. "he gave me my life. he gave me my mother, and eventually, he gave me you."

the fight on steve's tongue had been there in the gravel, billy could see, the depth shining in his eyes that he was partially wrong, that there was so much more to the world than one insignificant man's decisions. but two out of three made billy partially right, watching as steve settled down and wrapped billy up so tight in his arms.

"for what it's worth," he'd said, breath hot against billy's temple. "you owe him nothing for it."

a consolation prize, if he'd ever heard one, a side-step of the real issue at hand. billy never wanted to be the one to say *thank you*, never felt anyone deserved that much from him, let alone the dna that still walked this earth, that shared part-blood and genes. but billy had supposed, in the whisper of a breath, that steve was right. admitting what he had was only for him, only for steve, and if there ever was a moment to take back something significant, it was this, in

the way billy slept sound and the fact that he'd never actually have to say it to a smug bastard who never really deserved those kind words in the first place.

18. nights

Notes for the Chapter:

from this prompt: Imagine Billy and Steve holding hands in bed in the pitch black of night

steve doesn't think billy could ever truly surprise him, and it's not for lack of trying. the boy's easy as hell to read because steve understands what it's like to feel numb and cold and restless about the monsters under the bed and in the shadows, up and over the hills and in other dimensions. like vines, steve understands when demons haunt, when moods shift, and when he needs to be held or simply left alone.

this doesn't make billy boring, per se, but it does mean that steve knows a lot about him, a lot of things he thinks he probably shouldn't. they've discovered themselves together, cracked wide and open like granite, unable to piece it back together without the leftover line to prove it'd been broken in the first place.

steve can't always read billy's mind, but he's learned the way his heart beats rhythmically under the palm of his hand. he knows exactly what makes billy's breath hitch, when he's in pleasure, when he's having a nightmare, when he's about to cry because sometimes there are days when everything and nothing are too much.

what steve also expects are the moments where they close themselves in tight like glue, unable to wrestle their limbs from one another. they fall into the sheets so easily, so purely, that it becomes habit, a ritual they've perfected. steve, ever curious, always initiates, knows the undue burden of instigation, the admittance of truth if billy allowed himself a harmonious moment of indulgence.

but he doesn't, and it's said in his eyes, in how he blinks - that if he gives in, it might prove *him* right.

the logic, steve knows, isn't clear. makes no sense as he slides his teeth over the juncture of billy's collarbone because what they do together is definitive. but he's fortunate that billy doesn't leave, never

has, never would, another lack of surprise that keeps him whole.

on a night like this, though, with the full moon rising and the wet tears of something much bigger than the two of them could piece together - when the ghost and ghouls come crawling, steve half asleep to the world, expects the full ordeal to chase his fears away in dreams he can be free in - steve feels the softest touch, the glaringly different weight against his skin.

fingers overlap his, sliding across his palm until the sticky sweat of another's is encasing. steve doesn't move, and he doesn't turn his head with the intention of questions. instead, steve squeezes once as an act of solidarity, of faith and good will that he knows what this means for billy and what it says about him in this moment. he holds on tight, thumb brushing against the back of billy's hand, and then he pulls, drags their limbs together to the front of his face because steve can't always give words as reassurance.

like now, billy sometimes, on the rarity, gives him this trust, but only in small doses. this is one of them, and steve's lips meet the back of billy's hand, pressing against the warmth of his skin until steve finds it difficult to breath. he holds on like a lifeline, like a buoy in the water until billy's mouth, the swell of his lips, brush against the top of steve's shoulder.

steve doesn't think billy could ever truly surprise him, but sometimes- *sometimes*, he still does.

19. beauty

Notes for the Chapter:

based on this anon: I just thought of Steve seeing Billy smile for the first time, like a genuinely happy grin, maybe he's laughing a little, and Steve's heart just about gives up in his chest, stopping abruptly and then beating frantically like it's trying to make up the difference. Billy's still smiling, but when he notices Steve staring he tries to fight it back. "What, Harrington?" Steve shrugs dumbly, "Nothing, just... that's a good look for you." Billy's smile gets a little softer but no less bright.

Despite the fact that Steve has a pool in his backyard, the kids *insisted* that a slip 'n slide was needed to complete the true summer experience. Steve had only huffed because, "None of you have one, do you?"

Which left him more than cautiously aware that six kids shaking their head at him meant that they wanted one badly, and who other than the resident rich kid to provide that for them?

Steve sighs when he sees Mike and Dustin shoving one another for a turn, as if they've not been down the thing several times and aren't covered in blades of grass from the belly flops that left them halfway on the mat, nowhere close to the little pool of water they're meant to slide right into. "Take *turns*, goddamnit," Steve says, perched on a lawn chair. "Or I will take it away."

Immediately, he grimaces, doesn't care for the tone of mothering that's leveled out his voice over the past six months. Steve hadn't cared about a lot of things before, and the fact that he's got a gaggle of ducklings looking up to him makes him more than nervous. Going from local asshole to role model in the span of a few weeks still doesn't sit well with him no matter how many times the kids try to convince him that he's a good human being.

"Mike's gone more times than anyone else," Dustin says, a stomp to

his foot that only splashes water up into the air. "Give him a time out."

Steve sighs again, opening his mouth in preparation to separate the two because he doesn't actually know what the fuck is wrong with them and why, out of everyone, it has to be Mike and Dustin in disagreements.

Though before he says anything at all, a gruff voice interrupts him.

"Why don't you let Max or El go?" Billy says, shifting in his own lounge chair. The heat of the sun has done wonders for his tan, and Steve fights the urge not to stare at Billy's chest, his arms- hell, even his legs. His eyes are definitely important features, too. "Isn't it ladies first or some shit?" Billy slides his shades off his face, placing them on the table that's holding their drinks before pointedly glaring at two teenagers who've been acting like children.

"Fine," Mike says, glancing over at El who's smiling- *grinning* wide. "You fight really dirty."

She smiles even bigger, and Steve glances between the three of them - between Billy, El, and Mike and wonders when the fuck those two have gotten close enough for Billy to take her side.

The smile she sends Billy says it all, really. Steve never should've been surprised. He can't lie and say he doesn't have a favorite, but at least he doesn't make it obvious. "Alright," he snaps with a wave of his hand. "Let em go; quit your bickering and have fun with the toy I bought you guys. Ungrateful little shitheads." He's smiling, though, doesn't let his annoyance rock the boat because it's warm, and Steve feels good, and there's absolutely no reason for shit to go sideways.

Then again, it always does.

He's humming under his breath when the first shriek rings out into the backyard, Steve startled enough to sit up in his seat. When he looks around, there isn't any danger except a kid's face in the grass and the chime of giggles.

"You're such an *asshole*, Mike," Dustin says when he pulls himself up,

face covered in mud and water. He swats at Mike's ankles, narrowly avoiding Will and Lucas as he lunges for him.

"Takes one to know one," Mike grins, backing away from Dustin's attempts to grab him. It's quick when it happens, though, Steve halfway out of his seat when Mike trips over something in the grass. He lands with a thud, half in the grass and half in the sprinkler system that keeps the slide wet, a face full of water biting away any last words he might've had.

While Steve tries his best to hide his snicker behind the back of his hand, a sharp clamor of laughter catches his attention. Steve glances over at Billy who's laughing, who's not even trying to hide his amusement. It takes over his whole face, his entire body. Crinkles at the corner of his eyes, lips turned up into a beautiful smile.

Steve's heart just about gives up in his chest, an abrupt lilt before beating frantically like it's trying to make up the difference. There's been a lot of moments where Steve's felt his heart in his throat, felt like maybe it'd wiggle its way out of his ribcage and take off running, but nothing compares to this. Witnessing Billy genuinely happy, the heat of summer warming his skin into a dull pink that'll eventually color him darker.

Billy's still smiling when he notices Steve staring, bites the bottom of his lip in an attempt to scale back his delight like he's afraid Steve might berate him for laughing at these kids. Steve should. He should tell Billy that it isn't really funny and that one of them could end up hurt, but it'd be a lie to admit that he hadn't found Dustin and Mike's performance amusing.

"What, Harrington?" Billy says after Steve's stared for too long.

He shrugs dumbly, knows exactly what he's looking at. Knows exactly what makes his heart feel fluttery, but can't find the right words he'd need to frame this moment in complete perfection.

So, Steve doesn't try. He lets the moment hang like a beautiful painting on the wall, says, "Nothing," with another shrug, smiling back at Billy before adding, "That's a good look on you."

While tempted to specify the meaning, it seems Billy already understands. His smile grows a little softer but no less bright, and there's even a gentle flush blooming across his cheeks.

Eventually, under the strain of more bickering, Steve finally flicks his gaze back to the kids, already misses the heat of Billy's eyes on his. He clears his throat, notices that Dustin and Mike have been pulled apart by Lucas and Max, and he's thankful, if anything, that normalcy hasn't escaped them all quite yet.

20. cocktails

Notes for the Chapter:

In my thinking of how absurd Teen Wolf was sometimes - esp. with the molotov cocktail - I can't help but imagine a ST scenario where they're stuck in the high school with no way out because there's demodogs roaming, and that's their only option.

So, it's not until Billy suggests they find the science lab that Steve slowly catches on to what he's thinking.

"No," Steve says, shaking his head. "We're not burning the school."

Billy snorts, breaking open the lock to the chemical storage cabinet. "We're not burning the school, Harrington. It's already got a gaping hole in the wall from those demo-fucks. It's fine."

"It's not fine," Steve hisses low under his breath, knows the gaggle of kids are right behind him, huddled in the corner because of course this is how it always turns out: Steve the keen eye who follows a bunch of kids into trouble because their nosiness and hero complexes haven't been overruled by common sense and age yet. "Hargrove, it's *not* fine."

Billy shoves him out of the way, pulling out ingredients and a flask, completely ignoring Steve. "Do you have any other bright ideas, pretty boy?" he asks while he unscrews the lid belonging to an awful smelling container of liquid. "Because this is all what we've got right now."

He continues regardless of Steve shaking his head, regardless of his protests. No, Steve doesn't exactly care about the school. He couldn't give two fucks about this godforsaken place, but on the matter of principle and responsibility, he'd rather not leave behind more damage than necessary in any event that they get caught.

"What's he doing?"

Steve startles, turns around quickly, tries to block the kids' view from Billy because fuck, they don't deserve this. Don't deserve the danger and the threat looming over their heads. Steve briefly wonders how much more all of them can take, if this is the beginning of the end or if he'll have to spend what's left of his life in this hell-hole of a town fighting monsters because the goddamn government was too chicken shit to do it on their own.

"Nothing," he says to Dustin, the only one in the group willing to blatantly ignore Steve's orders. Mike just argues; Max is the lone wolf of common sense aside from Dustin. El's not here - thank fuck one kid is safe, and Will is so quiet, he hardly speaks unless absolutely necessary.

Dustin gives him a look that suggests Steve is a moron, and he might as well be because sure, he doesn't even believe in his own lie. Mainly because Billy's still shuffling around, cursing under his breath and doing whatever the fuck he's doing in order to get them out alive.

"Don't worry about it, Dustin," Steve pleads instead, nudges his shoulder so he'll return to the group. Unfortunately, he doesn't budge, attempts to peer around Steve until his eyes widen.

"No *fucking* way," he says, amazed, his tone suggesting that Billy's just earned himself massive brownie points.

"*Language*," Steve counters instead of the surprise that leaks into his bones over the fact that out of all the things Billy can do and has done, it takes *this* for Dustin to finally be impressed with him. Not the fact that Billy's apologized and made amends twice over; not the fact that he's dating Steve. But *this*, when they're on the brink of death and science! is their only available weapon. Cool.

"You're really going to do it?" Dustin asks, pushing past Steve as he saddles up to the lab table Billy is using to lay out his ingredients. The flask already as liquid in it, bubbles plastered to the side, sloshing around from having just been handled.

"Yes," Billy replies, not looking up as he picks up several small jars, looking for what he needs next.

“This is so cool.”

Steve breathes deeply, tugs on Dustin’s shoulder to pull him back. “It’s so not cool, and your ass better step back.”

Dustin only takes two steps back, but that’s it, and while Steve throws his hands in the air because no one is listening to him, he glances behind him to check on the other kids. They’re all watching Billy, too, mouths tight-lipped and a little more afraid than Dustin, rightfully so.

“Can you teach me?” Dustin’s voice rings out.

When Steve turns back, he’s pressed up against the table again, so Steve shoves him back a little harder this time. “He’s not teaching you shit. Stay back.”

“Yes,” is Billy’s reply, quickly glances up at Steve with a smug smirk on his face.

“You fucking do it, and you’re dead,” Steve promises, pointing a finger at Billy while making sure to keep a hand on Dustin’s shoulder. He hears the disappointed *aww*, *but Steve!* that escapes past Dustin lips, but thankfully the boy doesn’t move or protest further than that. “You’re not teaching anyone how to make a fucking weapon, Billy.”

In reply, Billy shrugs, sends Dustin an apologetic glance but continues mixing his products. The flask is about halfway full now, and the moment Billy caps it, he lifts it up, brings it to eye level, swirls it around and grins. “Ready to get the fuck out of here?”

This time, Billy is met with an enthusiastic *yes* from everyone, including Steve, and when they gather together, Billy taking the lead as they head towards the closed classroom door, Steve reaches for his hand, makes him pause when he quietly says, “I’m impressed, but you better fucking know what you’re doing.”

Looking back over his shoulder, Billy smiles prettily. “Always.”

And they do, in fact, make it out alive. A corner of the school and the loud shrieks of an incinerating demodog left burning behind them, however, do not.